

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The California High School Exit Examination

California has embarked on a bold new program to ensure that all students graduating from high school meet minimum standards for verbal and quantitative skills. The California Education Code, Chapter 8, Section 60850, specifies requirements for the High School Exit Examination (HSEE). Beginning with the Class of 2004, students must pass both the English language arts and mathematics sections of this exam to receive a diploma from a public high school in California. Since January 2000, the California Department of Education (CDE) has worked with a development contractor, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), to develop and try out test questions for use in the HSEE. The current schedule calls for testing 9th graders on a voluntary basis in March and May of 2001 with mandatory testing of all 10th graders (except those passing the exam as 9th graders) in 2002. Several additional testing opportunities will follow each year for students who have not yet passed the exam.

The legislation specifying the requirements for the new exam also called for an independent evaluation of the HSEE. CDE awarded a contract for this evaluation to the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO). Our evaluation will analyze data from a field test of items (test questions) and the annual administrations of the HSEE and report on trends in pupil performance and pupil retention, graduation, dropout, and college attendance rates. The evaluation will include recommendations for improving the quality, fairness, validity, and reliability of the examination. A report describing evaluation activities, findings, and recommendations (Wise, et al., 2000) was submitted on June 30, 2000 in compliance with the legislative mandate for a preliminary evaluation report by that time. This supplemental report covers analyses of data that were not available at the time the first report was submitted and also addresses questions and suggestions received in response to the June 30 report.

Key Findings and Recommendations from the June 30 Evaluation Report

The main conclusions of the Year 1 Evaluation Report, hereafter referred to as the June 30 report, were that a great deal of progress has been made in developing the HSEE and that results to date were quite positive, as indicated by several measures of the quality of the test questions. Nonetheless, a great deal remained to be done before the HSEE can be administered operationally. Further, educators surveyed were concerned that students are currently not well prepared to pass the exam.

The primary recommendation of this report was based on the evidence that students are not yet well prepared for the HSEE and that many important decisions also were needed before the HSEE is ready for operational administration. Our overall recommendation was:

The State Board of Education, Legislature, and Governor should give serious consideration to postponing full implementation of the HSEE requirement by 1 or 2 years.

Three more specific recommendations were included in the June 30 report. First, from discussions with panels of educators, surveys of principals and teachers, and discussions with

the State Board, it was clear that there is confusion about the purposes and nature of California's different high school testing programs. Therefore, our recommendation was:

Specific Recommendation 1. The Department and the Board need to work together to clarify the relationships and differences among the different high school testing programs, most notably the HSEE, the standards-based STAR assessment, and the Golden State Examinations

Results from our principal and teacher surveys indicated clearly that much needed to be done at the local level to ensure adequate preparation of all students for the HSEE and appropriate remediation for students who do not initially pass it. Our second recommendation was:

Specific Recommendation 2. The Department and Board should establish, expand, or accelerate processes for communicating with local districts about the HSEE and supporting their preparation for its implementation.

The HSEE Panel heard several presentations on testing accommodations for special needs students and English-language learners. The availability and appropriateness of such accommodations is an important legal as well as policy issue. More information is needed to reach informed decisions. Our final specific recommendation was:

Specific Recommendation 3. The Department and the development contractor need to gather, review, and discuss more information on the appropriateness and effectiveness of testing accommodations for special needs students and English-language learners.

Comments and Clarifications based on Responses to the June 30 Report

Since the June 30 report was issued, members of the evaluation team have met the Superintendent, the State Board, and the HSEE Panel. Extensive feedback during a telephone conference with the co-chairs of the HSEE Panel was particularly helpful. A brief summary of key issues and suggestions is provided here. Insofar as feasible, we have sought to provide an expanded discussion of these issues within the text of this supplemental report.

One particularly surprising reaction was the fear that schools familiar with the June 30 report recommendations would, based on belief that HSEE implementation was going to be delayed, relax their efforts to ensure that all students meet the California content standards. The message that we intended was, in fact, just the opposite. The most critical concern was that schools required time to develop and implement programs to help students pass the HSEE requirements. Having said that our most critical concern was getting students ready to take the test, we still talked more extensively about activities needed to get the test ready for the students. We provide some more discussion about what schools need to be doing in Chapter 4 of this report.

The HSEE Panel chairs found our background discussion of experiences in other states helpful. They would welcome suggestions for a plan of action to address the issues that other programs have confronted. The most critical of those issues arose in conjunction with legal challenges to exit exams, most recently in Texas and previously in Florida. Three main concerns are: (1) providing adequate notice to all concerned, (2) demonstrating educational

necessity, and (3) demonstrating that all students have a reasonable opportunity to learn the material on the test. In California, this last issue will be more of a shared activity between state and district educators than in Texas where the state had clear responsibility. We are certainly not a best source for legal guidance, and one of our first suggestions is to continue efforts that CDE has already begun to provide a broad array of legal advice to prepare for and preferably avoid program-stopping litigation. We provide suggestions for key activities that each stakeholder group needs to undertake prior to HSEE implementation in Chapter 5 below.

The Board recognized the critical importance of ensuring that all students have an opportunity to learn the material covered by the HSEE. They requested that more extensive information on district plans and efforts be gathered and reported. Our original intent was to collect baseline information on the current status of instruction relative to the content standards. We did not emphasize future plans leading some to consider our report “retrospective.” We will conduct a survey of all districts serving high school students early this fall covering future plans as well as current instruction. Preliminary results will be reported to the Board in November with a final report to be issued in December of this year. Members of the HSEE Panel also requested more detailed information as to which particular content standards appear to be most problematic with respect to ensuring all students the opportunity to learn them. We provide additional information on this topic in Chapter 3 of this report.

Organization and Contents of this Supplemental Year 1 Report

This supplemental report is organized into five chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 describes additional analyses of data from the Spring 2000 field test of HSEE test questions with primary focus on results for the essay questions that constitute a section of the English Language Arts (ELA) test. Responses to these questions had to be hand-scored and score information was not available in time for inclusion in the June 30 report.

Chapter 3 provides more detail on indicators of student preparation with respect to specific content standards covered by HSEE. We also provide an analysis of the representativeness of the sample of districts that participated in our item review workshops.

Chapter 4 presents final results from our surveys of teachers and principals. The June 30 report contained preliminary results from these surveys, but many additional responses were received after the cut-off for that report. Whereas the other chapters of this report are intended as supplements to the June 30 report, Chapter 4 is designed as a complete replacement for the corresponding chapter (Chapter 5) in the June 30 report.

The final chapter includes a discussion of conclusions and recommendations. Since the June 30 report, we have had an opportunity to review drafts of contractor plans and recommendations for a Fall Field Test, for determining the minimum passing score, and for the operational test administrations in March and May 2001. In Chapter 5, we raise some questions that must be addressed in carrying out these plans and offer some suggestions for their refinement.

